

Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, save us from the sin of believing that if we are constantly doing things then you must be pleased with us. Draw us to one side and speak to us, Spirit to spirit; show us what love really means; tell us again the truth about our salvation and give us the heart to listen. Restore our souls in the peace of your presence so that we may truly serve You, and neither the world nor our own desires. We praise You, Lord Jesus, AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

When difficult things happen to you today, pause if you can, and offer them to the Lord in prayer

On-going prayers

- **Pray for major industrial nations** *Pray for Japan, a nation with a distinct ethos and character. Pray for its government and industry.*
- *Pray against the violence in your community and your country*
- *Give thanks to God for the pleasure of preparing for Christmas*

Meditation

Almighty Father and Lord of all:

Stand guard over the words of our lips;
that we might speak the truth we know
and declare the Good News of Christ.

Stand guard over the thoughts of our minds;
that we might have a true discernment
to both know and do what is right.

Stand guard over the work of our hands;
that we might tear down Satan's empires
and build up the Kingdom of God.

Stand guard over the seeing of our eyes;
that we might turn from sin's temptations
and delight in the wonders of creation.

Stand guard over the direction of our feet;
that we might not wander away from truth
but walk in the footsteps of our Lord.

Bible passage – Luke 1:46-56

⁴⁶ And Mary said,

'My soul gives the Lord yet higher praise,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

⁴⁸ For He has respected the low standing of His servant,
So from now on, all generations will call me blessed!

⁴⁹ The Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is His name;

⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear Him
from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has done great deeds by His might;

He has scattered the arrogant in the thoughts of their hearts.
52 He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
53 He has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
54 He has given help to His servant Israel,
Having kept His mercy in mind:
55 As He promised to our forefathers,
to Abraham and to his descendants, forever.’
56 And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

Thought for the Day

Text

Luke 1:46,47

‘My soul gives the Lord yet higher praise, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.’

Thought

Mary had just been told that she was to bear God’s Son, the Messiah, and name Him Jesus. She was a young woman, for whom such news might completely block her marriage, yet she was able to rejoice in what God had told her, trusting that He would deal with her justly and with love.

Any of us may enjoy this spiritual tranquillity within the sea of life’s crises. We worship our God because it is right for us to do so, but when His hand is on us for some special task, we are lifted to a yet ‘higher praise’. Let us, like Mary, be ready for His touch.

Bible Study

Review

This powerful poem has been used by generations of Christians to reflect on their salvation. Each verse contains concise and expressive phrases, explaining what God has done through Jesus Christ and continues to do amongst His people today. The poem is known as the ‘Magnificat’ because this is the first word of its Latin version, and it has an important place in the liturgy of many churches because of its broad and expansive description of salvation.

If we think for a moment about the story within Luke 1, we will remember that immediately after responding to the angel Gabriel, Mary embarked on a long journey. She travelled for around three or four days to go from Galilee in the north to the hill country of Judea to the south west of Jerusalem, in order to tell her relatives, especially Elizabeth, the news. When she arrived, Elizabeth immediately shouted with delight and blessed her (1:43-45); however, Mary was more thoughtful. The words of her response come across as series of a well thought out reflections on the salvation of God. Gabriel had told Mary that the child to be created in her womb would be the Messiah (1:32,33), so it was natural that Mary should reflect on this.

It seems that the starting place for her thoughts were Hannah’s words in the Old Testament (1 Samuel 2:1-10), the well known song of praise sung by the mother of Samuel after she had given birth to him and dedicated him to the Lord in the Temple. Having been told that her child would be filled with the Holy Spirit, Mary pondered over what this might mean. Now if you read the song of Hannah, you will indeed find a few phrases that connect strongly between this and Mary’s song;

My soul acclaims the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour (Mary – 1:46)

My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God (Hannah – 2:1)

He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly (Mary – 1:52)

The Lord ... brings low, he also exalts, He raises up the poor from the dust (Hannah – 2:7)

Such parallels cannot be found throughout the two songs, however, because Hannah’s is a triumphant song, sung as if she is rejoicing at the expense of her husband’s other wife, who had previously chastised her for having no children (see 1 Sam 1:1f.). Mary, however, has no one to fight and there is no resentment or bitterness in her. The ‘Magnificat’ reads as if Mary, a young woman from rural Galilee, has been able to piece together the truth about the saving purposes of God from the Old Testament, whilst walking on her journey across Israel, and putting it into song. She did this by starting with Hannah’s words, but departing

from it to add phrases influenced by the prophets, which speak of God's salvation. For example, Mary's phrase *'He has pulled the mighty down from their thrones'* (1:52) does not come from Hannah, but from Isaiah, who prophesied *'I have brought down those who sat on thrones'* (Isaiah 10:13).

Every phrase of this great song uses Scriptural words to give a message that is not Old Testament, but New. It speaks about salvation as the victory of good over evil, of the pure mercy and love of God (1:50), and of the fulfilled Covenant promise of God made to the forefathers (1:55). It also speaks about salvation as having been accomplished and God's will having already been done, as if prophesying the work her son Jesus would soon do, to turn the whole world 'upside down' (1:53). Moreover, it prophesies God's purpose to bring His salvation to the poor and lowly, a theme barely found in the Old Testament but a strong feature of Jesus' own teaching.

Each verse of this great Scripture is a Gospel treasure store, and worthy not just of our passing attention, but of our very careful consideration. Moreover, the gift of this song is to lift the heart, like the smile on the face of one who has been blessed by God!

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper into these four sections of this poem:

- The praises of God (1:46-48)
- The blessing of God (1:49,50)
- The sevenfold saving deeds of God (1:51-54)
- The completed covenant promise of God (1:54,55)

Notes on the text and translation

Important words

V46 'gives the Lord yet higher praise'

The Greek word I have translated as 'to give higher praise' is 'megalunei'. This is not the word we might expect for 'praise'. It means 'to enlarge, to extend, to hold in high honour and esteem'. The well known and usual translation is 'magnifies', but such a word is not used today, even though it is poetic. I suggest the phrase 'give higher praise', which is accurate in so far as it sums up the range of meaning suggested by the Greek.

Significant phrases

V48 'For he has respected the low standing of His servant'

Other translations:

'He has been mindful of the humble state of his servant' (NIV)

'He has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant' (NRSV)

This has always been a difficult phrase to translate. The Greek says 'for he has looked with care on the humble state of his slave'. The translation I have given picks up the idea found in one Greek dictionary that the Greek word for 'to look with care' could well mean 'to respect'. I have also preferred the expression 'low standing' as being both accurate in respect to the Greek and also language that is current.

V51 'He has done great deeds by His might'

Other translations:

'He has performed mighty deeds with his arm' (NIV)

'He has shown strength with his arm' (NRSV)

The translation I have given avoids the use of the phrase 'with His arm', because it is accepted even in the Old Testament that most of the references to God's 'arm' are descriptions of His strength and might, and the Hebrew word equivalent to the Greek word in this sentence is often translated 'might' in the Old Testament. I see no reason why this should not be so here.

Problems with the ancient Greek/Hebrew text

V46 'Mary said'

The Majority of ancient manuscripts say 'Mary said', but a few significant ones say 'Elizabeth said'! So do we have a genuine uncertainty about whether the great poem that follows (the Magnificat) was in fact said by Mary or Elizabeth? Not really. Although there is not much clear evidence from the manuscripts to say which is right or wrong, the tone of the Magnificat is quite different from Elizabeth's prophecy only a few verses previously (1:42-45). Elizabeth shouts out with exultant praise addressing Mary, but the Magnificat is more reflective, and it addresses God. In addition, the phrase '*the Mighty One has done great things for me*' (1:49) sounds more like Mary speaking than Elizabeth. All scholars accept that the evidence of some manuscripts saying '*Elizabeth said ...*' are an unfortunate error.

Going Deeper

The praises of God (1:46-48)

Elizabeth's praise was shouted out, a cry of blessing and praise. Mary delivered her praise no less intently but with measured intensity; she says that she gives yet 'higher praise'. The translation notes (above) point out that instead of using the usual word for praise, Mary talks about the increase of her praise and worship. We all know what it is like to worship the Lord and feel blessed in so doing, but then something happens that expands our praise, and we are lifted to new heights. I am not talking about musical effects or the use of specific words, but the power of the Holy Spirit to lift the soul and make praise grow in the heart of the worshipper. We cannot engineer such things, this is the work of the Spirit. As Mary journeyed and came to Elizabeth, her praise and esteem of the Lord grew; this is the true evidence of her faith.

The poem says in verse 48 that Mary's heart of praise grew as she began to understand an important truth about the nature of God; '*He has respected the low standing of His servant ...*'. It is easy for us to point this out now, but it was staggeringly difficult for the people of the day to understand. God had chosen to bring salvation into the world not through the established, wise, learned and spiritual wisdom of Israel's rabbis, Pharisees, scribes and priests, but through a relatively unlearned young girl. In those days, few would have believed that a young country girl had the spiritual purity to bear the child of God in her womb. Indeed, the Temple priests would have assumed this should be the function of a descendant of Aaron, such as Elizabeth. Luke's entire story breaks the religious mould and demonstrate God's utter humanity and impartial judgement; in the world, the Gospel does not work 'top down', but 'bottom up'.

The blessing of God (1:49,50)

The next stanza of Mary's poem contains four lines of praise and blessing offered to God; she begins; '*the Mighty One has done great things for me ...*' (1:49). These words express direct thanks to God for what He has done, and they are Mary's personal thanks to the Lord for her pregnancy and the privilege granted to her. It is possible for any of us to be so caught up in events that we fail to remember to give thanks to God directly and personally for what He has done for us; we are thankful in spirit, but do not actually say so to the Lord. Mary did not make that mistake, even though her circumstances must have seemed uncertain and insecure. She blessed the Lord as '*Mighty*' and strong, and therefore able to do what He had promised. She also proclaimed His holiness (1:49) and His mercy (1:50).

Mary's perception of the Lord as a God of holiness and mercy is profoundly insightful. The prophets of the Old Testament struggled to understand the nature of God and how He could be said to be merciful and just at the same time. Mary did not agonise over the problem as they did, she simply confirmed her faith that this was the truth; moreover, she proclaimed this as the eternal nature of God '*from generation to generation*' (1:50). Throughout the Old Testament, there is great emphasis on the passing on of God's blessings from generation to generation, and even though the story of God's people had been chequered, it had still been passed on. Though the people of Israel were profoundly flawed and perhaps unready for the revelation of their Messiah, the covenant blessings of God had been passed on, and even Mary, an unknown country girl from Galilee, knew about the great mercies of a her faithful God.

The sevenfold saving deeds of God (1:51-54)

At the heart of the Magnificat, there are seven great statements about what God has done to bring salvation into the world. Each one of these is important, and they all stand as Mary's testimony to the grace of God in salvation.

- **God has '*done great things*' (1:51).** The Lord God has all power and is able to do whatever is required for His work of salvation. People are often tempted to think that God's power is displayed in Creation and other ways, but not in their own lives or in the specific circumstances they face. However, He is 'Almighty', and will do everything necessary to win us, and bring us into eternal life.
- **God has '*scattered the arrogant in the thoughts of their hearts*' (1:51).** Here, the 'arrogant' most likely refers to those of God's own people who think they know better than to trust the heritage

of God's people, as just confirmed by Mary (see 1:50). In her day, these would be the Pharisees and other religious experts, the same people Jesus confronted in His ministry.

- **God has 'pulled the powerful down from their thrones' (1:52).** Whilst those who think they have the intelligence to question God are scattered (see above), those who think they have more power than God are 'pulled down'. The illusion of power continues to this day, as we can see in world affairs all around us. Those who think they know better will never trust God for their salvation.
- **God has 'lifted up the lowly' (1:52).** At this point in the Magnificat, we hear about the nature of God's salvation that turns the world's values upside down. Those with power are pulled down and the lowly are lifted up. It is amazing to think that the gap between the rich and the poor in this world continues to increase, but God will bring this to an end, and His Kingdom must demonstrate this Gospel truth.
- **God has 'filled the hungry with good things' (1:53).** We cannot read the Bible and fail to notice that the message of salvation is what we would call 'practical' as well as 'spiritual'. Indeed, we cannot separate the two. This sentence can mean that God will reward those who are hungry to find God, but this should not blind us to the fact that it is also about His desire to feed the poor, and empower His people to do just this.
- **God has 'sent the rich empty away' (1:53).** This power of God is a warning to each of us that when we acquire more than we need for our living then we are 'rich' in His eyes. Those who retain their wealth do so against the wishes of their Maker, who sees all things. Those who regard themselves as 'right' in all spiritual matters and claim riches in the things of God (and it is very easy for this to happen), have little before the throne of grace, as Jesus points out (see Matthew 25:31f.).
- **God has 'given help to His servant Israel' (1:54)** God is constantly giving His people help. He did this in Old Testament times, and He does this now to the new Israel and people of God, the church. It is unwise for us to run the church as if everything depends on our efforts; it does not, and the future is in God's hands.

I have offered some comments on each of the seven elements of God's work for the salvation of the world. However, we would be wise to remember this. All these things are the evidence of God's work in our midst. We should not just know them, we should look out for them happening all around us. Where we see such things, God is working in power to save people.

The completed covenant promise of God (1:54,55)

At the very end of the Magnificat, we read these words; '*as He promised to our forefathers, to Abraham and to His descendants forever.*' (1:55). This is no casual ending to Mary's song of praise to God. This is Mary's prophecy of the completion of God's Covenant promise. Throughout the Old Testament, we have seen the development of God's Covenant with His people, the model of His relationship with people that was intended to be demonstrated to the world and become a blessing to it, and the means whereby all people could come to God (see Genesis 12:2,3). The Covenant is not just defined by Abraham's first experiences with God (Genesis 15), or by the law given to Moses and also described as the 'Covenant' (Exodus 20). Neither is it defined by the fulfilment of God's promise to His people to live in the Promised Land (see Joshua 24), or the promise of God to David that one of His ancestors would sit on the 'throne of Israel' forever (2 Samuel 7). We leave the Old Testament at the point where the prophets perceived that God would have to make a 'new Covenant' (Isaiah 61:8, Jeremiah 31:31, Ezekiel 16:60 etc.).

All these greats of the Old Testament are the 'descendants' mentioned here by Mary, and the whole of the Old Testament Covenant will be fulfilled by God in the salvation to be brought into the world through the child within Mary. At this point in Luke's Gospel, we do not know how this will happen, and neither do we know how Jesus will fulfil the salvation promises of God outlined in the Magnificat. Nevertheless, Mary prophesies these things, and they will come true.

Application

God had been building up to this moment throughout history, and now His own Son was created in the world, within the womb of a young woman in Israel. The 'Mighty One' (1:49) was at work to upset and overthrow unjust human powers and authorities (1:52) and act to bring hope and salvation, starting with the poor (1:53). The work that God was doing within Mary would bring a fundamentally new relationship between God and all humanity. For centuries, the world was not ready for this dramatic event, but now, God judged that it was. It is hard for us to comprehend the full drama of what was happening.

The 'Magnificat' captures this moment of time just before the ministry of Christ, and with every opportunity to study it, we will find that it speaks to us about the truths of God's work in the world from that time until now.

Under the heading of this study called 'application', we can hardly suggest any response other than to get to know this Scripture and use it. It is in the Bible for a purpose, recorded as the considered reflections of Mary on the ministry of God and of her son Jesus Christ.

Surely, we can learn from Mary that although God's blessing does not depend upon praise, the heart that is directed towards its Lord in unfettered praise will rejoice far more in the Lord's boundless mercy. Surely, we can learn from Mary that the saving power of God, described sevenfold in her song, is uninhibited and boundless in its power to save today, whatever the circumstances of our troubled world. There is something about this song that urges us to believe the impossible, to trust in the boundless mercy and love of God for all circumstances, and to have confidence that love will never be conquered by evil, when Jesus, the Saviour, is at work. Mary had no choice but to give herself in total commitment to her child, as any mother must do to her baby, but hers was the first experience of that true discipleship to which we are all now called. We have a choice whether to believe this salvation and live it, or to travel as we will, and when we have made this choice to follow in His way, we find it not so much a choice as our essential blessing.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. How does this great poem remind you of the saving power of God? Why is this poem so memorable?
2. How does this poem look forward to the ministry of Jesus, to His life, His teaching, His death or His resurrection?
3. Within your group, describe to each other how you felt when you first knew that you were saved by the grace of God through Jesus Christ.

Topics covered by this text

- *The salvation of God*
- *Praise and blessing*
- *The saving characteristics of God*
- *The promise of God to fulfil His Covenant*

Personal comments by author

There is absolutely no way that I can deliver a complete set of study notes on a passage such as this! Moreover, if I were to split it up into chunks, our understanding of it as a single great work of Scripture would be impaired. I have to hope that by writing as I have done, I have teased open a few doors that will help the reader to explore further into this great and intense poem. Personally, I regret the fact that many modern churches do not use Scriptures such as this as liturgies to be said by people. We can all learn so much by repeating them to the point of knowing them inside out.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Take each of the seven great saving characteristics of God, and meditate on them during the course of one week, perhaps using the rest of the Magnificat as a prayer of introduction and conclusion to each act of meditation.*
 - *Read a newspaper and compare what you read in it with what you have read here in 'Mary's song'. Think about the difference between the world and the world as God can make it.*
-

Final Prayer

Glorious Lord; You live in perfect harmony and peace, and You also see the world with all its sinfulness and discord. Your plan has always been to change the world through Your Saviour Jesus Christ and bring it at last back to its harmony and peace, in You. Thank You Lord God, for the love we find in Jesus Christ, which makes this real: AMEN
